

## **March for Our Lives: Poor People's Economic Human Rights!**

*Women with children, disabled, blind, homeless, unemployed, downsized and uninsured people defied the police and took over the streets of New York*

*by Portia Anderson*

Denial, fear, deception and the disappeared. It seems to be the running theme of America. One in three Californians has no health care. Over 41 million Americans are without health insurance.

Think about the growing lines in county clinics, shelters and soup kitchens. Think about how our wealthy and insured Republican controlled Senate refused to extend unemployment benefits beyond a 26-week period. Guess you better find work by the 27th week!

If nothing else, think about our country's trillion dollar deficit that poor and middle class Americans will be forced to carry through cuts in social security and Medicare. Our safety net is in shreds.

This is a country pictured by immigrants in dreams of gold paved streets and an excess of everything for everyone. In reality, this excess is greedily consumed by a few, while America's poor are shunned, deemed unfashionable and forgotten.

We, the poor, jobless, downsized, uninsured victims of welfare reform and others abused by the institutions of domination are no longer silent. We are moving forward with the work and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer and so many freedom fighters to improve the lives of Americans.

On Aug. 30, in the midst of New York's sweltering heat and the final preparations for the Republican National Convention, the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC) broke the silence on poverty. I was one of the members of the 13-person Bay Area delegation to participate in an amazing national effort called Bushville (Tent City), and I joined over 15,000 people in front of the United Nations for a "March for Our Lives: Stop the War at Home" rally. We came from organizations like San Jose's faith-based Community Homeless Alliance Ministry, Covenant House of West Oakland, the Women's Economic Agenda Project and leaders from March for Education of Richmond.

Women's Economic Agenda Project Executive Director Ethel Long Scott says, "Under the banner of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, we targeted the devastating economic policies that have been hurting us for the last four years." These folks made great sacrifices to link arms across color lines to rally for our country to recognize the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - the inherent, human, God-given rights to health care, free education, affordable housing and a living wage. The declaration was signed by this country well over 50 years ago.

### **Bushville**

PPEHRC set up a tent city in Brooklyn called Bushville to demonstrate the conditions of homeless Americans and the almost nonexistent access to health care many Americans experience. It was difficult for organizers to get a Brooklyn church to commit space to Tent City. There was so much negative pressure from the city officials. The larger status quo churches turned it down. A small but courageous African American church called the Mt. Zion Christian Church of Christ Disciples located in Brooklyn's Bed Stuy neighborhood courageously stepped up to the plate.

Mt. Zion opened their parking lot and Sunday service to tent city residents. These courageous parishioners, Black men and women, poor materially but rich in spirit and courage, saw a bigger mission and embraced our desire, regardless of our own spiritual traditions, to testify to the difficulty

we have in accessing non-employer-linked health insurance and to other human rights abuses we suffer in this country – rights that are more and more in jeopardy as I write.

The police sent patrol cars to watch the church and Bushville activities, that is the ones they could clearly identify. Everyone and all activities were closely videotaped and watched. This was made evident by the throngs of media, cameras and recorders at the rally and subsequent to it. Not to mention the closeup shots the police had of a “protestor” who stomped a cop during the march.

### **March for Our Lives**

Women with children, disabled, blind and homeless, unemployed, downsized and uninsured people and PPEHRC, representing over 100 poor people’s groups from Seattle, Oakland, Kentucky and Los Angeles stood at the United Nations to describe the conditions of unemployment, homelessness, food insecurity and poverty we experience. We vowed not to live in shame but with dignity and to place shame and blame at the steps of a government that’s failed to provide for its people.

For me, the standing part was easy, but the approach was a hair-raising ordeal. We arrived from the subways and walked to the U.N. Plaza to be greeted by hordes of New York City’s finest (police). Dozens of police were on foot, in riot gear, in police cars and on motorcycles.

New York City expected a reenactment of the 1968 riots that besieged the Democratic National Convention. We entered the barricaded area to exercise our constitutional right to peacefully assemble and prepared to march. PPHERC was permitted to rally but not march. Thus organizers prepared many of us for the possibility of arrest and how that could impact our lives.

The PPHERC organizers like Cheri Honkala repeatedly and publicly had us swear a public oath of peace and nonviolence. The visually impaired, mothers with their children, the wheelchair bound and the elderly were prepared to be arrested.

I was so overwhelmed and impressed by the courage of the sickest and most vulnerable, my hardship meant very little in comparison. So instead of staying behind or ducking into the subway, I too stepped out onto the streets to join with my comrades for economic justice. They made me stand up.

The members of Bushville and PPHERC and others at the front of the march were prepared to present to President Bush the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Articles 19, 23, 25 and 26, which essentially articulate our right to communication, housing, health care, a living wage job and education.

However, the police had their orders to arrest. But the Buddhists were chanting and the Muslims, Christians and Jews were praying. The New York City police relented, stating “We are humans first” and moved aside the barricades, which allowed the thousands of people to move into the streets and march 65 long, hot New York blocks to Madison Square Garden.

Representatives from PPHERC had this to say: “Despite not having a permit, thousands of marchers stepped into the streets of downtown Manhattan in a peaceful, nonviolent march that stretched for blocks as it made its way to Madison Square Garden, the site of the Republican National Convention. The Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign’s march yesterday was nothing short of a tremendous success, as we were able to ensure that poor people in this country have a voice and bring their message of the economic human rights to housing, healthcare, living wage jobs and education all the way to Madison Square Garden.

“At Madison Square Garden, we left a ‘Citizens’ Arrest of George W. Bush for Crimes Against Humanity.’ At the march we were accompanied by International Human Rights Observers, including Nora Cortinas of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Linea Fundadora) of Argentina, and Alexis Ponce of the Inter-American Platform for Human Rights, Democracy and Development, from Ecuador and Jan Flaherty of England.”

Our fight for economic human rights does not end on Election Day Nov. 4. That is just the beginning! This movement is bigger than a presidential campaign! Join us in our work to reform our

society to one that meets all of our basic human needs for truly affordable housing, quality education, health and a living wage for all.

### **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (signed in 1948) Article 23**

(1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.

(2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.

(3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

(4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

### **Article 24**

Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

### **Article 25**

(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

### **Article 26**

(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

We have a right to exist, live and thrive! For information see [www.marchforourlives.org](http://www.marchforourlives.org) and [www.kwru.org](http://www.kwru.org) or call Oakland's Women Economic Agenda Project at (510) 451-7379, ext. 222.

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